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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001863

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA NOT WILD ABOUT SLEIMAN, BUT  
LOOKING FOR AN OUT

REF: A. BEIRUT 1860

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1855

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 1854

[1](#)D. BEIRUT 1852

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) PM Siniora blasted the French for mismanaging its failed initiative to find a consensus president and humiliating the Patriarch in the process, during a November 26 meeting with the Ambassador. An otherwise relaxed Siniora bristled at each mention of Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Suggesting that, without the Patriarch on board or strong U.S. support that mobilized the international community, a half plus one president was not a viable option, Siniora stressed the need for new ideas. He avoided directly addressing the issue at hand (Hariri's plan to elect Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as president) in front of his advisors, waiting until he was alone with the Ambassador to share his thoughts on the subject. On that, Siniora said that he had reluctantly come to the conclusion that, short of being able to get Nassib Lahoud or another March 14 alternative elected, Sleiman was the best choice. He wanted to move extremely quickly -- with Sleiman elected by this coming Friday -- but recognized that March 14 leaders and cabinet ministers needed to be brought on board first. End summary.

REASSURING THE PATRIARCH

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[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with PM Siniora and his advisors, Mohamad Chatah and Rola Nouredine, at his office (with only an empty hook where President Lahoud's picture once hung) in the Grand Serail on November 26. Siniora was quite relaxed despite his government's having taken over presidential powers upon Lahoud's departure at midnight November 23 in the absence of a successor. He agreed that some were pointing to his visit to the Patriarch at Bkirke on November 24 (the morning after President Lahoud stepped down) as evidence the Sunnis were

plotting to exclude Christians from the government, despite his efforts to reassure the Patriarch about his government's good intentions.

13. (C) Siniora said the meeting actually was "very good," and the Patriarch was "very appreciative" of everything Siniora was doing and invited the PM to stay for lunch. The PM noted having spoken with other spiritual leaders as well to help make them understand that he was the "victim, not the criminal" in this situation. This shouldn't be a battle between Aoun and Siniora, Chatah added. The Ambassador suggested that if the Sunnis expedited the release of their long-planned spiritual document stressing their commitment to Taif and Lebanon's 50-50 confessional system, it would help take the wind out of Aoun's sails.

#### FRENCH MISMANAGED THEIR INITIATIVE

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14. (C) Siniora blasted France's mismanagement of its initiative to find a consensus president. Despite all of his warnings to the Europeans, especially the French, not to take the Patriarch down a road where he would end up feeling humiliated, they had done just that by not reaching an agreement on one of the names on his list. In particular, the French had told the Patriarch, based on their assurances from Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, that Robert Ghanem would be elected. The fact that Berri then rejected Ghanem was proof the Syrians did not want elections. He told the French not to trust the Syrians, but they did, with presidential vacuum being the result.

15. (C) Now, Siniora continued, the failure of the French initiative was an incentive to "extremists" like Aoun, who had now "coronated himself" as the "political Bkirke" and was consulting with everyone, but refusing everything except his own candidacy. The time has come, Siniora said, for some

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creative thinking and cool-headed evaluation of the situation to consider options that weren't on the table before.

#### HINTING AT SLEIMAN SOLUTION

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16. (C) Did that mean more compromise, or proceeding with a half plus one vote? the Ambassador asked. The half plus one track requires the Patriarch's blessing, and "he's not there yet," Siniora responded, though he conceded that if the Patriarch saw no other way out, he might agree. Without the weight of the Patriarch, this would not work. Furthermore, Siniora was not even sure March 14 would go for it, if it was not already "an option on the table." Perhaps, he suggested, a new idea was needed. The president did not have to be a name on the Patriarch's list, Siniora said, adding that he was willing to consider any plan that "will get us out of this situation."

17. (C) The Ambassador, noting that Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea was feeling excluded and taken for granted by his March 14 allies, expressed concern about a deepening split within March 14 along Christian and Muslims lines. Siniora responded that any step that rocked the boat would "get everyone wet," including Geagea, whom he would see later that day. But we can't react to scare tactics, he said, and have to deal with options that are within the realm of possibility.

#### ASKING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT FROM THE U.S.

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18. (C) Chatah noted that one thing that was dividing March 14 was different perceptions among its leaders regarding where Syria was headed. Has it split with Iran, as suggested by Syria's decision to go to Annapolis despite Hizballah's denouncement of the conference? Or have the two countries

just swapped roles, in which case pursuing the half plus one option would certainly lead to violence. Furthermore, Chatah said, "we're in the dark" as to the U.S. position regarding Syria.

#### SINIORA EXPLAINS SUPPORT FOR SLEIMAN

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¶9. (C) At this point the Ambassador, having been cautioned by Chatah at the beginning of the meeting that Siniora would not want to discuss the Sleiman option in front of Nouredine, asked to see Siniora privately. Alone with the Ambassador, Siniora said "show me" how to make a half plus one vote happen. "Show me" how to elect Nassib Lahoud, "the best option" for Lebanon. If that's impossible, then we should try Sleiman. There is a possibility the opposition won't accept Sleiman's candidacy, in which case we've at least exposed their position that they really do not want anyone elected. Siniora acknowledged that March 14 leaders and GOL cabinet ministers need to be united behind this approach.

¶10. (C) Sleiman, whom he had met with that morning, is not a bad person, Siniora said. He's ordinary (meaning not devious), not a Lahoud, and not a simple Syrian agent. At least by supporting him we'd have the LAF on our side. But is it a Syrian trap? the Ambassador asked, to which Siniora replied that he had thought earlier that electing Sleiman had been the Syrians' goal, but now he believed they did not want elections at all. Siniora admitted still having three layers of concern regarding Sleiman: 1) constitutional (he did not like the idea of amending the constitution again to elect a president); 2) institutional (he opposed another military man as president); and 3) personal. But in the end, having Sleiman as president was better than a void and better than Michel Edde. (Note. Chatah, waiting with Pol/Econ Chief outside while the Ambassador and Siniora engaged in their tete-a-tete, also mentioned the possibility of unknown Sleiman "skeletons" that the Syrians could use to their advantage. End note.)

#### COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Siniora, though remarkably relaxed given the circumstances, became immediately agitated each time the

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subject of Aoun came up. While alone with the Ambassador, he received a phone call with Fady Abboud, head of the Industrialists Association and a member of the Maronite League delegation that had just met with Aoun, that caused him to raise his voice so loudly that Chatah and Pol/Econ Chief, waiting outside, peeked in to make sure his outburst was not directed at the Ambassador. We have been told that Siniora's apparent about-face on Sleiman is explained by several factors, including the realization that his caretaker government has a limited shelf life, pressure on Siniora from the Saudis and Saad Hariri, and his own personal desire to extricate himself from Lebanon's political mess. It seems, however, that the Aoun card touches a personal nerve, and a Sleiman presidency has the appealing advantage of putting a huge dent in Christian support for Aoun (who has been particularly nasty regarding Siniora of late, even by the already low standards Aoun set for his professional discourse).

¶12. (C) Siniora's message to us, which we have been hearing from other March 14 contacts as well, is a plea for help. Either the U.S. should send an immediate strong signal that it would support March 14's efforts to elect a half plus one president, or March 14 needs to find an alternative option that it can live with. We do not believe any of those advocating Sleiman are crying wolf in an effort to scare the U.S.; there is a genuine fear that March 14 will be left standing in the cold if it dares to defy Syria without strong international support for a half plus one president,

especially given the perception by some that U.S.-Syrian relations may be thawing. Rather than trying to force the U.S. to take a strong stand, March 14 seems to be genuinely asking for guidance between what it sees as the only remaining options on the table. March 14 leaders know that the U.S. is with them, but what they want to see is evidence that the U.S. is using its international clout to build a strong coalition in favor of a March 14 presidency that will make the Syrians accept such an outcome as inevitable. End comment.  
FELTMAN